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# Non-marital Romantic Relationship Commitment and Leave Behavior: The Mediating Role of Dissolution Consideration

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Running Head: DISSOLUTION CONSIDERATION AND LEAVE BEHAVIOR

Non-marital Romantic Relationship Commitment and Leave Behavior:

The Mediating Role of Dissolution Consideration

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## Abstract

Two studies investigated the process by which individuals in non-marital romantic relationships characterized by low commitment move toward enacting leave behaviors. Predictions based on the behavioral, goal, and implementation intention literatures were tested using a measure of *dissolution consideration* developed for this research. Dissolution consideration assesses how salient relationship termination is for an individual while one's relationship is intact. Study 1 developed and validated a measure of dissolution consideration and Study 2 was a longitudinal test of the utility of dissolution consideration in predicting the enactment of leave behaviors. Results indicated that dissolution consideration mediates the association between commitment and enacting leave behaviors, is associated with taking more immediate action, and provides unique explanatory power in leave behavior beyond the effect of commitment alone. Collectively, the findings suggest that dissolution consideration is an intermediate step between commitment and stay/leave behavior in close relationships.

Keywords: Commitment, dissolution, dissolution consideration, non-marital romantic relationships

## Non-marital Romantic Relationship Commitment and Leave Behavior:

## The Mediating Role of Dissolution Consideration

Terminating a romantic relationship, even a non-marital one, is among the most distressing events an individual can experience. Relationship termination has been shown to have consequences such as anger and sadness (Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006), clinical depression (Bruce & Kim, 1992), emotional upheaval in the form of increased insecurity (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003), and decreased physical health (e.g., depressed immunologic functioning; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1987). Perhaps due to the host of negative consequences, attention has focused on achieving a better understanding of what leads a couple to dissolution. Much of this attention has focused on relationship commitment (or lack thereof; e.g., Le & Agnew, 2003). While there is some divergence among theorists and theories about the exact nature of commitment, most agree that it involves factors that cause individuals to persist in a relationship (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Brickman, Dunkel-Schetter, & Abbey, 1987; Johnson, 1991; Kelley, 1983; Levinger, 1979; Surra, Hughes, & Jacquet, 1999).

*Commitment in the prediction of persistence*

One model that has been shown to be especially useful in predicting commitment and persistence across many different relationship types, including non-marital romantic relationships, is the Investment Model (Rusbult, 1980). This model emerged out of Interdependence Theory, which posits that it is a given relationship's unique structure of interdependence that is useful in explaining persistence and other relationship processes (Kelley, 1979). To characterize the interdependent structure of a relationship, the Investment Model holds that commitment to a target is fueled by three independent factors: (a) satisfaction level, (b) investment size, and (c) quality of alternatives (Rusbult, 1980). Satisfaction level is the

individual's subjective appraisal of the positivity and negativity that he or she experiences in a relationship; satisfaction is positively associated with commitment level. Quality of alternatives refers to the most attractive option an individual perceives he or she would have if he or she were not in the current relationship; alternatives are negatively associated with commitment. Finally, investment size is the amount of tangible or intangible resources that are attached to a relationship that would be diminished in value or completely lost should the relationship dissolve; investments are positively associated with commitment level.

The Investment Model posits that an individual's commitment level, the product of the three aforementioned factors, is predictive of his or her persistence in a relationship. A meta-analysis of work involving the Investment Model corroborated this prediction, finding that the correlation between commitment and relationship persistence is .47 (Le & Agnew, 2003). This level of association is strong, particularly for a single variable, but it is clear that not all variation in relationship persistence is explained by commitment alone. It is the general aim of the current study to begin to elucidate the process by which commitment level affects stay/leave behavior. In doing so, it is our hope that we will increase the understanding of relationship termination and illuminate how to maximize prediction of leave behavior.

#### *Intentions in the prediction of goal-directed behavior*

To understand better the process of how commitment affects action toward dissolution, it is useful to review the behavioral intention literature. This literature has a rich history of linking beliefs, attitudes, and motivations to behavior, and details how intentions can reliably invoke subsequent action.

The theory of reasoned action (TRA) was proposed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) in part of a larger attempt to confirm the usefulness of attitudes in predicting behavior. The TRA is

comprised of two components, both held to predict behavioral intention: attitudes and subjective norms. Following criticisms regarding components it was lacking, such as the amount of control an individual has over a particular behavior (Ajzen, 1985), the TRA was revised as the theory of planned behavior (TPB) which adds perceived behavioral control as both a direct and indirect influence on behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1988, 1991). Like the TRA, the TPB asserts that having strong intentions to enact a behavior reliably produces more action than does having weak intentions (Ajzen, 1985). However, similar to findings in the commitment literature, the meta-analytic correlation between intention and behavior has been found to be .47 (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Research has examined whether inconsistency between intention and behavior is caused by people who intended to act but failed (“inclined abstainers”), or people who did not intend to act but did (“disinclined actors”). Results indicate overwhelmingly that the inconsistency is caused by “inclined abstainers,” (Sheeran, 2002). Given this, research has begun to focus on the process by which intentions become action, to determine why people often become inclined abstainers rather than actors.

#### *Goal versus implementation intentions*

Goal intentions were identified by Gollwitzer as the first naturally occurring step of successful goal pursuits (Gollwitzer, 1993). Goal intentions are theorized to signify the end of deliberation about whether to act and specify a certain outcome an individual desires to reach. This conceptualization has received empirical support. The average correlation between goal intentions and subsequent behavior has been found to be .56 (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). Gollwitzer has suggested that individuals who are ultimately successful in their goal pursuit turn their goal intentions into more specific plans regarding when, where, and how goal intentions will be achieved (Gollwitzer, 1996). These plans, referred to as implementation intentions, are

more proximal to action, and more specific regarding the steps necessary to achieve the goal, than are goal intentions, and thus more reliably predict behavior (Gollwitzer, 1996). A meta-analytic examination of implementation intentions corroborated this, finding that the correlation between implementation intentions and behavior is .65 (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). To date, implementation intentions are regarded in the behavioral intention literature as the most proximal psychological precursor to action.

How forming implementation intentions benefits goal achievement is twofold. First, it causes the mental representation of anticipated situations to become highly activated and easily accessible (Gollwitzer, 1996). This means that inclined individuals who have formed implementation intentions will have heightened sensitivity to the necessity to act, and will thus be better able to detect and attend to opportunities to act (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). Second, forming implementation intentions automatizes action initiation for inclined individuals, causing behavior initiation to occur immediately, efficiently, and sometimes outside of conscious awareness when the opportunity for action arises (Brandstatter, Lengfelder, & Gollwitzer, 2001). This has been shown empirically in a number of ways, but most notably it has been found that the temporal proximity of action is closer for individuals who formed implementation intentions compared to those who formed goal intentions (Gollwitzer & Brandstatter, 1997).

*The process of relationship dissolution: A new look*

The relationship commitment-persistence literature parallels that of the behavioral intention literature to a point. In both instances, it has been found that intention (commitment) is a good predictor of behavior (dissolution), but that it fails to explain all of the variance. Given the parallelism, we believe predictions about commitment affecting dissolution based on findings

in the behavioral intention literature are quite reasonable. At the same time, there are notable differences between the two literatures.

The most notable difference is the nature of the dependent variable. In the behavioral intention literature, the dependent variable is the *behavior* that the inclined individual enacts. In the commitment literature, the tradition has been to measure dissolution as a dichotomous end state (i.e., intact or dissolved; cf. Agnew, Arriaga, & Goodfriend, 2006; Agnew, Arriaga, & Wilson, 2008). As relationships are necessarily dyadic, dissolution only requires that one partner become inclined to act. Measuring dissolution dichotomously assumes that each dissolved partner's prior state (e.g., commitment level) is predictive of the termination of the relationship. To illustrate the problem with this assumption, however, in longitudinal research it has been found that individuals whose relationships remain intact hold similar initial levels of commitment to those who are abandoned by their partners. Those who leave their partners, in contrast, endorse lower initial commitment to the relationship (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Thus, only the prior state of the actor is predictive of dissolution; the non-acting partner's prior state does not necessarily predict dissolution.

The first specific aim of the current investigation was to emphasize that instigation of and responsibility for relationship termination should be measured rather than simply assessing whether the relationship is intact or dissolved at some later time point. Specifically, we propose that dissolution is the product of a series of leave behaviors that can be enacted by either partner, resulting in the relationship being terminated. This operationalization of dissolution, we believe, will increase the accuracy of prediction by specifying whether any particular participant's previous state should be predictive of relationship termination (i.e., whether the participant acted toward dissolution). As such, we hypothesize that:



*Dissolution will be better predicted by commitment when considered as a composite of leave behaviors (deciding to dissolve, initiating dissolution, and suggesting dissolution), than as a dichotomous measure of the end state (dissolved or intact) (Hypothesis 1).*

Our next specific aim was to characterize the process by which individuals who experience low commitment move toward enacting leave behaviors. In the behavioral intention literature, goal intentions specify a certain desired outcome that is associated with a sense of obligation to reach that outcome (Gollwitzer, 1999). A parallel in the commitment-persistence literature is the concept of commitment itself. Commitment, as defined by Rusbult and colleagues (1998), refers to intent to persist in a relationship that includes long-term orientation and psychological attachment to the relationship. More proximal and specific to action than goal intentions in the behavioral intention literature are implementation intentions or plans, which involve the mental representation of the desired future situation becoming highly salient (Gollwitzer, 1999). Applied to romantic relationship termination, these plans would be specific to the actions necessary to end the relationship and would occur once an individual decided on the goal of ending the relationship. To assess whether individuals have formed such plans, in the current study we measured the thoughts individuals have regarding dissolution. These thoughts, which we call *dissolution consideration*, are theorized to be the product of the mental representation of relationship termination being highly salient. Thus, dissolution consideration is hypothesized to function in a manner similar to implementation intentions and facilitate movement between ebbing commitment and the enactment of leave behaviors. We hypothesize that:

*Dissolution consideration will mediate the negative association between commitment and enacting leave behaviors (Hypothesis 2).*

The effectiveness of implementation intentions is due not only to increased saliency of the desired end state, but also to automatizing action toward that state. Functionally, this is evidenced by people who have formed implementation intentions exhibiting quicker responses toward the desired end state than individuals who have formed only goal intentions (as cited in Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). As we propose that dissolution consideration is the product of having made such plans, we also expect that dissolution consideration will be associated with more immediately seizing opportunities to enact leave behaviors. Past research has not demonstrated that low commitment predicts *when* leave behaviors will be enacted. Dissolution consideration, however, by virtue of the increased saliency of enacting leave behaviors, should propel individuals to enact leave behaviors at the first reasonable opportunity. Thus, we hypothesize that:

*Dissolution consideration, but not commitment, will be positively associated with the immediacy of enacting leave behaviors (Hypothesis 3).*

In demonstrating the process by which an individual moves from flagging commitment to enacting leave behaviors, we hope to also maximize the prediction of leave behaviors in non-marital romantic relationships. When formed, implementation intentions provide a significant increase in prediction of subsequent behavior over goal intentions, so it is hypothesized that the same should be true for dissolution consideration and commitment. Thus, we hypothesize that:

*Dissolution consideration and commitment considered simultaneously will account for significantly more variance in leave behaviors than will commitment alone (Hypothesis 4).*

*Overview of the current studies.*

To test our hypotheses, two studies of individuals in non-marital relationship were conducted. Study 1 was cross-sectional and was designed to validate a measure of dissolution consideration and demonstrate that it is a construct unique from commitment. Study 2 was longitudinal and was designed to test the hypotheses concerning the enactment of leave behaviors.

## Study 1

Before hypotheses testing, we conducted exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to validate a measure of dissolution consideration. We also wished to demonstrate that it is distinct from commitment. More specifically, in exploratory factor analyses we examined the number and nature of underlying constructs derived from measures of commitment and dissolution consideration collected from individuals in non-marital relationships. In subsequent confirmatory factor analyses, we validated whether the factor structure derived from the exploratory analyses represented the best latent variable structure. We assessed the validity of a two-factor model (with separate commitment and dissolution consideration factors) versus a one-factor model. To demonstrate the consistency of our findings across samples, one sample was used for the exploratory analyses and a second sample was used for the confirmatory analyses.

*Method*

*Participants in Sample 1.* Two hundred forty-nine undergraduate students at Purdue University (148 males and 101 females) who were currently involved in a romantic relationship participated. The average duration of their relationship was 15.3 months ( $SD = 14.82$ , Median = 9). Most participants indicated that they were involved in an exclusive dating relationship (82.4% with 17.6% casually dating). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 25 years ( $M = 19.49$ ,

$SD = 1.34$ ), and the majority indicated that they were White (73.1%, with 17.7% Asian, 5.6% Black, and 3.9% Hispanic).

*Participants in Sample 2.* Sample 2 was composed of 237 Purdue University students (146 male participants and 91 female participants). The average duration of their relationship was 17.84 months ( $SD = 15.67$ , Median = 13). Most participants indicated that they were involved in an exclusive dating relationship (86.8%, with 13.2% casually dating). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30 years ( $M = 19.52$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ), and the majority indicated that they were White (73.0%, with 16.9% Asian, 4.6% Black, and 5.5% Hispanic).

*Procedure.* All participants completed the measures described below in partial fulfillment of an introductory psychology course requirement. Participants signed up for a particular time to complete the study through the Purdue University subject pool website. They completed the measures described below in large computer labs across campus, after which participants were debriefed and thanked for their time.

*Measures.* All participants completed five items assessing commitment to their current romantic partner. The items were taken from the commitment subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998) and from Arriaga and Agnew's (2001) work on the components of relationship commitment. We included two items assessing an individual's general level of commitment to a relationship ("I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner," and "I want our relationship to last a very long time"). Additionally, to demonstrate that dissolution consideration is a distinct construct from conceptually similar components of commitment (particularly, "intention to persist," cf. Arriaga & Agnew, 2001), three additional items were administered addressing the conative, cognitive, and affective components of commitment (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993): "I intend to stay in this

relationship” (tapping the conative component), “I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship (for example, I imagine being with my partner several years from now)” (tapping the cognitive component), and “I feel very attached to our relationship -- very strongly linked to my partner” (tapping the affective component). All items employ a nine-point response scale ranging from 1 (“do not agree at all”) to 9 (“agree completely”). Consistent with past findings with the Investment Model Scale, the reliability of the commitment scale was high (Sample 1  $\alpha = .93$ , Sample 2  $\alpha = .94$ ).

Additionally, five items assessing dissolution consideration were collected, based on Weiss and Cerreto’s Marital Status Inventory (1980). The items were adapted to be applicable to non-marital samples and focus specifically on thoughts regarding dissolution: “I have been thinking about ending our romantic relationship,” “More and more it comes to my mind that I should breakup with my partner,” “I find myself wishing that my partner and I weren’t romantically involved,” “I have been close to telling my partner that I want to end our romantic relationship,” and “I have told people other than my partner that I might end my relationship with him/her.” All items use a nine-point response scale ranging from 1 (“do not agree at all”) to 9 (“agree completely”). Reliability of this scale was high (Sample 1  $\alpha = .94$ ; Sample 2  $\alpha = .94$ ).

### *Results and Discussion*

*Sample 1: Exploratory Factor Analysis.* Responses to the 10 items measuring commitment and dissolution consideration were subjected to exploratory factor analysis using the maximum likelihood method to extract the factors. Eigenvalues of 30.46 and 7.15, accounting for 100% of the variance, suggested the presence of two meaningful factors. As the factors were moderately correlated ( $r = -.55$ ), a promax (oblique) rotation was conducted.

In interpreting the rotated factor pattern, an item was determined to load on a particular factor if the factor loading was greater than .60 for that factor and less than .20 for the other. Using these criteria, five items were found to load on the first factor, which was labeled “Commitment.” The remaining five items were found to load on the second factor, which was labeled “Dissolution Consideration.” Items and corresponding factor loadings are presented in Table 1.

*Sample 2: Confirmatory Factor Analysis.* Confirmatory factor analysis was used to determine whether the two-factor structure found in the exploratory factor analysis with Sample 1 best represents data obtained from a second sample. We tested a two-factor model that constrained items found in the exploratory factor analysis to be assessing each of two latent dimensions to those dimensions (commitment and dissolution consideration). The analyses included the same five commitment items and five dissolution consideration items as in the exploratory analyses. Results indicated that all five items hypothesized to load on a Commitment factor loaded significantly on that factor (with  $t$  values ranging from 12.26 to 18.67, all paths significant at the .01 level). All five items thought to load on a Dissolution Consideration factor loaded significantly on that factor (with  $t$  values ranging from 12.36 to 18.86, all paths significant at the .01 level). See values in brackets following the items in Table 1 for confirmatory factor loadings.

With respect to overall model fit, results of structural equation analyses indicated that a two-factor model provided a good fit to the data [ $\chi^2(31) = 57.60$ , Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) = .95, with a desirable chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio of 1.86; Loehlin, 1992]. We then compared the overall fit of this two-factor model to a one-factor model by computing the difference between the chi-square and degrees-of-freedom associated with each model (Loehlin,

1992). The one-factor model assumed that all 10 items are being driven by a single latent construct. To support the two-factor model, the loss in degrees-of-freedom corresponding to the extra path in that model would have to be offset by a significant reduction of chi-square value from the one-factor model. If not, acceptance of the two-factor model would amount to sacrificing theoretical and statistical parsimony for the sake of a negligible change in chi-square (Loehlin, 1992; MacCallum, Wegener, Uchino, & Fabrigar, 1993). A chi-square difference test indicated that the two-factor model provided a better fit to the data than did the one-factor model [one-factor model:  $\chi^2(32) = 303.50$ , GFI = .80; chi-square to degree-of-freedom ratio = 9.48;  $\chi^2$  difference between two-factor and one-factor model (1) = 245.90,  $p < .001$ ]. The results suggest that the items crafted to measure dissolution consideration and commitment represent distinct factors.<sup>1</sup>

## Study 2

### *Method*

*Design and Participants.* This study employed a two-wave longitudinal design. Approximately four months after participation at Time 1, participants were contacted and asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire. Four hundred ten participants who met the eligibility requirement of being in a romantic relationship at Time 1 and who participated at Time 2 were included in the analyses (175 male participants and 235 female participants). The average duration of relationship at Time 1 was 16.62 months ( $SD = 15.72$ , Median = 12.0). Most participants indicated that they were involved in an exclusive dating relationship (93%, with 7% casually dating). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30 years ( $M = 19.41$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ), and the majority indicated that they were White (84.0%, with 8.4% Asian, 3.7% Black, and 3.9% Hispanic).<sup>2</sup>

*Procedure.* Participants signed up for a particular time to complete the study through the Purdue University subject pool website. All participants completed the measures described below in partial fulfillment of an introductory psychology course requirement. They completed the measures in large computer labs across campus, after which they were debriefed and thanked for their time.

Approximately four months after participating at Time 1 ( $M = 4.32$  months,  $SD = .38$ ), participants were contacted via email individually and invited to return to the questionnaire web site to complete a Time 2 questionnaire. They were reminded of their Time 1 partner's first name prior to completing the measures described below. Participants were allowed to complete Time 2 at whatever time they chose from any location with internet access.

At Time 2, 117 (28.54%) of the participants indicated they were no longer dating their Time 1 romantic partner while 293 indicated they were still involved with their Time 1 partner.

*Time 1 Measures.* Commitment was assessed with the same five items described in Study 1. Consistent with past uses of the Investment Model Scale, as well as with the Study 1 samples, reliability was high ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Dissolution consideration was measured with the five-item measure validated in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Finally, participants answered demographic questions about themselves, their current partner, and their relationship to serve as control variables in analyses [including questions about age (in years), gender (coded male=1, female=2), sexual orientation (coded heterosexual=1, non-heterosexual=2), relationship duration (in months), cohabitation status (coded cohabitating=1, not=2), and whether the partners live greater than 100 miles apart (coded yes=1, no=2)].

*Time 2 Measures.* At Time 2, participants were asked the following question to assess stay/leave behavior: "Are you still romantically involved with this person?" Possible responses



were “No, we are not romantically involved (i.e., we broke up)” and “Yes, we are still romantically involved.” Participants who answered “no” reported how many weeks had elapsed since the dissolution occurred by answering the question, “How long ago did the breakup occur?” and completed a subscale from the Assessment of Relationship Changes (Agnew et al., 2006). The relevant subscale included one question regarding deciding to leave the relationship (“In the end, who made the final decision to end your romantic relationship?”), one question regarding initiating dissolution (“Who was the person who first said something or did something that initiated the end to your romantic relationship?”) and one question regarding suggesting dissolution (“Who first suggested ending your romantic relationship”). The response options for these items were “You” or “Your Partner,” and were coded such that “You” was 1 and “Your partner” was 0. The mean of these three items was calculated and used as an overall action index, ranging from 0 (no action taken toward dissolution by participant) to 1 (all actions taken toward dissolution by participant). Participants who reported that their relationship had not ended by Time 2 were assigned a 0 on the action index, as having not dissolved indicated no action toward dissolution was taken. Combining the three individual leave behaviors formed a reliable scale ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

### *Results and Discussion*

All hypotheses were tested including the following Time 1 measures as covariates: participants’ age, sex, sexual orientation, relationship duration, cohabitation status, and whether the partners were separated by greater than 100 miles.

*Descriptive analyses of study measures.* Overall, at Time 1 high levels of commitment ( $M = 7.74$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) and low levels of dissolution consideration ( $M = 2.43$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ) were endorsed. At Time 2, the majority of the sample reported having not engaged in leave behavior

(77.80%). Of those participants who did, 17.58% reported one of the three measured actions (deciding, suggesting, or initiating), 38.46% reported engaging in two leave behaviors, and 43.96% reported engaging in all three behaviors. Leave behavior in all analyses ranged from 0 (no action taken) to 1 (action taken on all dimensions toward dissolution). Of the participants who reported engaging in leave behaviors, the mean level of action reported on this scale was .61 ( $SD = .37$ ). For each of the three leave behaviors, participants were more likely to have said that they were the actor than was their partner (60.36% decided, 54.05% initiated, 71.17% suggested).

For participants who reported their relationship having ended, an additional measure of the immediacy of dissolution was computed. The number of weeks elapsed since the dissolution as reported at Time 2 was subtracted from the total number of weeks elapsed between Time 1 and Time 2 for each participant. For example, if a participant reported at Time 2 that their relationship had ended 5 weeks prior, and 19 weeks had elapsed between their participation in Time 1 and Time 2, that participant would receive a 14 on this measure. Greater immediacy was operationalized as fewer weeks having passed between Time 1 and the dissolution. The average number of weeks between Time 1 and the reported dissolution was 8.91 weeks ( $SD = 4.58$ , Median = 9.29). See Table 2 for correlations among all study variables.

*Testing Hypothesis 1.* Hypothesis 1 held that dissolution is better predicted by commitment when considered as a composite of behaviors that indicate the termination of the relationship, rather than a dichotomous measure of whether or not the relationship ended. To test this hypothesis, we analyzed two multiple regression models. In the first model, the traditional dichotomous dissolution measure was used as the dependent variable. As predicted and found in past research (e.g., Rusbult et al., 1998), commitment level was significantly and negatively

associated with the relationship having ended [ $\beta = -.342, t(408) = -7.18, p < .0001$ ]. In the second model, we used the composite action measure as the dependent variable. Commitment level was again significantly and negatively associated with the participant having enacted more leave behaviors [ $\beta = -.363, t(408) = -7.66, p < .0001$ ]. To test Hypothesis 1 directly, we compared the strength of association between commitment and each of the dependent variables (dichotomous versus composite action) in an analysis of dependent correlations. The association between commitment and the composite action score variable was significantly stronger than the association of commitment to the dichotomous variable [ $t(407) = 7.95, p < .0001$ ]. Thus, Hypothesis 1 received support. For the remainder of the analyses, we used the composite action score as the measure of leave behavior.<sup>3</sup>

*Testing Hypothesis 2.* Hypothesis 2 held that the association between commitment and leave behavior is mediated by dissolution consideration. We first determined that commitment was significantly associated with both dissolution consideration [ $\beta = -.666, t(408) = -17.61, p < .0001$ ] and leave behaviors [ $\beta = -.363, t(408) = -7.66, p < .0001$ ], and that dissolution consideration was also associated with leave behaviors in a model including commitment [ $\beta = .160, t(408) = 2.58, p = .01$ ]. We then formally tested the hypothesized mediation.<sup>4</sup> We conducted two formal tests and compared their results for consistency. First, we conducted a Sobel test, which tests the indirect effect directly (Sobel, 1982). Specifically, the Sobel test compares the combined effect of the paths between the IV and mediator and between the mediator and the DV to zero. We used a modified Sobel test that included the standard errors of the paths, and as such, did not rely on the assumption that the product of the errors was vanishingly small as assumed by a traditional Sobel test (Aroian, 1944; Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Results from this test revealed that dissolution consideration did significantly mediate the association between commitment level and leave behavior, Sobel  $z = -2.56$ ,  $p = .01$ .

We were prompted to conduct an additional test of mediation by the burgeoning literature regarding the advantages of alternatives to the Sobel test (e.g., MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002; Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). To complement the significant result found with the Sobel test, we also conducted a nonparametric bootstrapping procedure. This is a procedure used to estimate effect sizes and test hypotheses that makes no assumptions regarding the shape of the distribution of the variables or of the sampling distribution of the statistic (as cited in Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Bootstrapping results based on 1000 resamples showed that the indirect effect is estimated to lie between  $-.0436$  and  $-.0013$  with 95% confidence. As zero is not included in this confidence interval, dissolution consideration can be said to significantly mediate the association between commitment level and leave behaviors at  $p < .05$ .

Both tests of mediation provide converging evidence in support of Hypothesis 2, indicating that dissolution consideration significantly mediates the association between commitment level and leave behavior. See Figure 1 for a visual representation of Hypothesis 2 results.

Our prediction regarding mediation was supported; however, we also wanted to address the possibility that the impact of dissolution consideration on subsequent action may be *moderated* by commitment to the relationship. As such, we performed multiple regression analyses in which commitment, dissolution consideration, and the interaction of the two variables were included in a model to predict leave behaviors. In this model, the interaction term

was not significant [ $t(399) = -.11, p > .90$ ], providing evidence that the association between dissolution consideration and stay-leave behavior is not moderated by commitment level.

*Testing Hypothesis 3.* Hypothesis 3 held that dissolution consideration, but not commitment, will be positively associated with the immediacy of enacting leave behaviors. To test this hypothesis, we conducted correlation analyses, including commitment, dissolution consideration, and the time elapsed between Time 1 and the reported dissolution. Results revealed that commitment was not significantly associated with the immediacy of dissolution,  $r = -.14, p = .17$ . Dissolution consideration, however, was significantly and positively associated with the immediacy of the dissolution,  $r = .23, p = .02$ . Further, the association between the immediacy of dissolution and dissolution consideration was significantly stronger than the association between the immediacy of dissolution and commitment [ $t(101) = 2.08, p < .05$ ]. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported. Dissolution consideration, but not commitment, was positively associated with the immediacy of enacting leave behaviors.

*Testing Hypothesis 4.* Hypothesis 4 held that a model including dissolution consideration and commitment will account for more variance in leave behaviors than will a model containing commitment only. To test this hypothesis, we computed three models: one including just the control variables, one including the control variables and commitment, and one including the control variables, commitment, and dissolution consideration. We then compared the  $R^2$  values for each model to see if the additional variables in each subsequent model produced a meaningful increase in the amount of variance explained (Pedhazur & Kerlinger, 1982). Results indicated that adding commitment to the control model saw an increase in  $R^2$  value from .026 to .150, and that this increase was significant [ $F(1, 404) = 58.99, p < .0001$ ]. Additionally, adding dissolution consideration to a model containing the control variables and commitment saw the  $R^2$

value increase from .150 to .164. This difference was significant, [ $F(1, 403) = 6.70, p = .01$ ]. Thus, results supported Hypothesis 4, indicating that the combination of commitment and dissolution consideration accounts for significantly more variance in leave behavior than does commitment alone. See Table 3 for the complete regression results for each of the three models.

### General Discussion

We investigated the process by which individuals in non-marital romantic relationships characterized by low commitment move toward enacting leave behaviors. Predictions based on the behavioral intention literature were tested using a measure of *dissolution consideration* developed for this research. Dissolution consideration assesses how salient relationship termination is for an individual while one's relationship is intact by tapping key facets of goal and implementation intentions (i.e., experiencing increasing commitment toward the outcome and making incremental progress toward the goal). Results indicated that (a) commitment and dissolution consideration are conceptually and empirically independent, (b) dissolution consideration mediates the association between commitment and enacting leave behaviors, (c) is associated with taking more immediate action, and (d) provides unique explanatory power in leave behavior beyond the effect of commitment alone. Collectively, the findings suggest that dissolution consideration is an intermediate step between commitment and stay/leave behavior in close relationships.

We began our hypothesis testing by examining a discrepancy between the behavioral intention and relationship commitment-persistence literature in terms of the dependent variable used. We proposed that measuring dissolution as a series of leave behaviors would result in a dependent variable that was more reliably predicted by commitment than a measure based on a

dichotomous end state (Hypothesis 1). This hypothesis was supported. The impact of this finding is twofold. First, it serves as a reminder of the notion that more precise measurement provides the basis for stronger empirical results (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Also, it provides an outcome more theoretically relevant in some circumstances (e.g., when being used as a dependent variable predicted by only one dyad member's previous data).

We tested predictions informed by the behavioral intention literature in the context of relationship dissolution. We found support for our hypothesis that the association between flagging commitment and enactment of leave behaviors is mediated by dissolution consideration (Hypothesis 2). Past work with implementation intentions has shown that saliency of a situation that requires action means that stimuli to act receive attention, are remembered, and are effectively recognized even in a complex context (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). The support we found for our hypothesis corroborates this notion. Terminating a romantic relationship can involve quite difficult behaviors to enact, especially given that relationships typically play a central role in an individual's life (Berscheid & Reis, 1998) and are incorporated into an individual's self-concept (Aron, 2003). People who experience low commitment to their relationship do enact leave behaviors; however, our results suggest that commitment influences leave behaviors through heightened awareness of situations in which to enact the behaviors. In the particularly complex context of relationship termination, dissolution consideration is an important intermediate step between possessing low commitment toward one's relationship and leaving one's partner.

We also received support for our related hypothesis that dissolution consideration is associated with more immediate action (Hypothesis 3). We hypothesized that once dissolution is salient, which is marked by increased dissolution consideration, action should follow relatively

quickly. This was predicted due to findings in the behavioral intention literature that heightened awareness of the critical situation to act causes action to occur automatically (Brandstatter et al., 2001). We do not, however, mean to imply that people terminate their romantic relationships automatically. Rather, we mean that people may react to and seize opportunities that they have selected as appropriate for enacting leave behaviors once the need to act is salient. In this way, individuals take more immediate action toward dissolution to the extent that the need to do so is salient and dissolution consideration is high.

Our final hypothesis was that considering dissolution consideration and commitment simultaneously would account for more variance in leave behaviors than would commitment alone (Hypothesis 4). This hypothesis did receive significant empirical support, but the support was not especially robust. We were surprised by the relatively small amount of change in variance in leave behavior accounted for by the addition of dissolution consideration. Post hoc theorizing has led us to consider three potential explanations that may help explain a greater proportion of the variance in leave behavior.

First, the three bases of commitment (i.e., satisfaction, investment, and alternatives) may have direct impact on persistence, not mediated by commitment level. There is no clear and consistent past evidence of such direct effects when the three bases have been entered into multiple regression analyses with commitment simultaneously in the prediction of persistence, however (Rusbult et al., 1998). Similarly, it is possible that the three bases may differentially impact the process of enacting leave behaviors. In the current studies, dissolution consideration was found to mediate the association between flagging commitment and enacting leave behaviors when our sample was looked at as a whole, regardless of why each individual was low in commitment. Future research may benefit from parsing apart individuals on the basis of *why*



their commitment had ebbed. Implementation intentions have been shown to be maximally effective when the goal is difficult to enact, yet provide little help when the goal is relatively simple and straight forward (Gollwitzer & Brandstatter, 1997). Ending a romantic relationship is inherently complex, but there may be variants on leaving the relationship that make it even more taxing. For example, in some cases, individuals may have made considerable investments into their relationship. Greater investments may be seen as an especially difficult complication to overcome in order to leave a relationship as it represents more barriers which must be maneuvered (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008; Rusbult, 1980). Future research may benefit from examining the precursors to commitment level to identify if certain structures are associated with a stronger influence of dissolution consideration on leave behaviors.

Second, the variance in leave behaviors may not be completely explained by commitment and dissolution consideration because, in some circumstances, commitment may predict a relationship will remain intact, whereas dissolution consideration may predict the same relationship will end. Such circumstances may arise when there are extra-dyadic forces causing the relationship to terminate, such as unexpected infidelity by one of the partners or newly discovered disapproval of the relationship by friends or family members (Afifi, Falato, & Weiner, 2001; Buunk, 1987; Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007; Shackelford & Buss, 1997). For example, an individual who comes to realize his friends greatly dislike his partner may consider leaving the relationship to appease his friends in spite of his own report of high commitment to the relationship at Time 1. Alternately, an individual who realizes that her partner is having an affair may consider ending the relationship because she feels hurt and betrayed, even if her own commitment to the relationship is high. As such, dissolution consideration may be a substantially better predictor of dissolution than commitment level when

extra-dyadic forces are the catalysts of relationship termination. Future research examining this possibility may be able to explain the impact of particular events on partners' attitudes and motivations that promote dissolution.

Third, the addition of dissolution consideration to a model containing commitment in the prediction of leave behaviors may have not provided as large of an increase in explanatory power as expected due to methodological limitations. We generated hypotheses based on the behavioral intention literature, but we did not also draw from the method of this literature. The implementation intention literature is characterized by randomized experiments that detail the process of goal pursuits. There are serious ethical considerations when attempting to parallel this empirical strategy in work involving romantic relationships, as experimentally assigning increased saliency of dissolution may cause relationships to end which otherwise would not have. Instead, we measured naturally occurring saliency through self-reported thoughts about dissolution.

One limitation of the current method is that self-report has been shown to be biased with regard to the negative aspects of romantic relationships (e.g., Loving & Agnew, 2001). Moreover, past research has demonstrated that individuals hold perceptions that their own close relationships are better than others (Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). Despite the fact that dissolution consideration relies on individuals reporting on a particularly negative aspect of their relationship (their thoughts of ending it), we do not believe this limitation should cause concern about the reliability of the findings presented here. People are motivated to distort their reports of their relationships in the direction of social desirability (as cited in Loving & Agnew, 2001). Thus, we would expect that people would *underreport* their thoughts about dissolution, potentially biasing results away from significance. This limitation, then, did not hinder our

ability to test the theory as applied to romantic relationship termination, but it is quite possible that it did limit our ability to accurately quantify the proportion of variance accounted for by saliency of dissolution.

Additionally, we measured commitment and dissolution consideration only once and predicted whether action occurred over the subsequent four months. We know from both the theory guiding the current research as well as our results that dissolution consideration is associated with more immediate action. Consider participants who reported no dissolution consideration at Time 1 yet enacted leave behaviors by Time 2. These participants could have experienced heightened saliency of dissolution prior to enacting leave behaviors, but it occurred after we measured dissolution consideration at Time 1. Measuring dissolution consideration more frequently would likely have increased the effect sizes of our tests.

Regarding future attempts to measure the constructs of commitment and dissolution consideration, as explained in Footnote 1, we encourage researchers to vary the wording of the measures. Specifically, using a mix of positively and negatively worded commitment and dissolution consideration items helps to ensure both the theoretical and empirical distinctiveness of these constructs.

We see the current studies as a step toward understanding variation in leave behavior by providing a potential explanation of the process that leads individuals with flagging commitment to enact leave behaviors. To explain a greater proportion of the variance in leave behaviors, we believe it would be beneficial for future research to address the theoretical extensions of this work, as well as address the limitations of the current studies. At the same time, the present results represent, to our knowledge, the first application of behavioral intention predictions to the context of relationship dissolution. The results of this merger provide initial evidence regarding

the process underlying relationship termination. It is our hope that greater understanding of the process will provide a framework in which to examine moderators of the process of dissolution and facilitate more accurate prediction of dissolution.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> One reviewer expressed concern that the two-factor structure found in Study 1 might be attributed to response tendencies, given that each of the commitment items was worded positively, whereas each of the dissolution consideration items was worded negatively. To address this possibility, we collected additional data from a sample comparable to Sample 2 (i.e., virtually identical demographics;  $N = 252$ ). Each participant responded to 10 items, five intended to tap commitment and five intended to tap dissolution consideration. Importantly, the wording of 2 of the items from each scale was reversed (e.g., instead of “I intend to stay in this relationship,” participants responded to the item “I do *not* intend to stay in this relationship”). We then conducted confirmatory factor analysis to determine whether a two-factor structure best fit the data when the wording of the items was mixed. With respect to factor loadings, results indicated that all five items hypothesized to load on a Commitment factor loaded significantly on that factor (with  $t$  values ranging from 15.16 to 19.22, all paths significant at the .01 level); moreover, all five items thought to load on a Dissolution Consideration factor loaded significantly on that factor (with  $t$  values ranging from 9.65 to 16.05, all paths significant at the .01 level). As with the Study 1 data, a chi-square difference test indicated that a two-factor model provided a better fit to the data [ $\chi^2(31) = 87.35$ , GFI = .94] than did a one-factor model [ $\chi^2(32) = 175.86$ , GFI = .87;  $\chi^2$  difference between two-factor and one-factor model (1) = 88.51,  $p < .001$ ]. Thus, using both positively and negatively worded items to assess each construct yielded the same pattern of results reported in Study 1, in which all of the items for each construct were worded similarly.

<sup>2</sup> Only participants who completed both Times 1 and 2 were included in the analyses. Five-hundred participants (54.9%) completed only Time 1, however, and were not included in analyses. At Time 1, these participants exhibited lower commitment [ $t(908) = 3.23, p < .01$ ] and higher dissolution consideration [ $t(908) = -3.23, p < .01$ ] than did the participants who completed Time 2. The absolute magnitudes of the differences are not especially large (commitment  $M = 7.39$  vs.  $7.74$ ; dissolution consideration  $M = 2.89$  vs.  $2.43$ ), but nonetheless we sought to address the potential attrition bias. We used multiple imputation (Rubin, 1987, 1996) to produce estimates of what would have been found had the entire sample completed Time 2. Each missing value was replaced with a set of 40 plausible simulated values that were then analyzed by a complete-data method (Graham, Olchowski, & Gilreath, 2007). The results of these analyses varied, so they were then combined to obtain overall valid statistical inferences that reflect the uncertainty due to missing values and the finite-sample variation (Graham, Cumsille, & Elek-Fisk, 2003; Schafer & Graham, 2002). We used SAS 9.1 PROC MI to produce the simulated values and parameters. We then compiled the results with PROC MIANALYZE when possible (e.g., regression parameters), or by hand averaging when necessary (e.g.,  $R^2$  statistics). The patterns of results derived from the imputed data do not differ from the results derived from the observed data for any of the hypotheses. Specific results can be obtained from the authors.

<sup>3</sup> We also ran the analyses pertinent to leave behavior (i.e., Hypotheses 2 and 4) using the dichotomous variable of whether or not the relationship ended as the dependent measure. The pattern of results from these analyses does not differ from the results obtained when the composite action score was used as the dependent measure. Specific results can be obtained from the authors.

<sup>4</sup> Mediation is most commonly analyzed by procedures outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986; see Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Recent commentary, however, has pointed to some flaws in this approach under certain circumstances (MacKinnon et al., 2002; Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Especially relevant here is the discussion of sample size. It is possible that the path from the IV to the DV will drop substantially upon the addition of the mediator, but that there will be no corresponding appreciable drop in statistical significance. This is especially likely with large sample sizes, as those are the conditions under which even small regression weights remain statistically significant (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). As the data presented here represent over 400 cases, this concern is quite applicable. As such, we used alternative tests to establish mediation.

Table 1

Exploratory Factor Analysis Loadings from Sample 1 and Confirmatory Factor AnalysisLoadings from Sample 2 (Study 1)

Factor		Scale Item
1	2	
Factor 1: Commitment		
.79	-.12	I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner. [1.61]
.77	-.14	I want our relationship to last a very long time. [1.67]
.91	-.06	I intend to stay in this relationship. [1.80]
.93	.06	I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship (for example, I imagine being with my partner several years from now). [1.89]
.75	.05	I feel very attached to our relationship -- very strongly linked to my partner. [1.26]
Factor 2: Dissolution Consideration		
-.06	.93	I have been thinking about ending our romantic relationship. [2.42]
-.00	.95	More and more it comes to my mind that I should breakup with my partner. [2.42]
-.20	.65	I find myself wishing that my partner and I weren't romantically involved. [1.46]
.05	.87	I have been close to telling my partner that I want to end our romantic relationship. [2.18]
-.02	.83	I have told people other than my partner that I might end my relationship with him/her. [2.26]

*Note.* The number in brackets following each item is the loading obtained from Sample 2 confirmatory factor analysis; all loadings are significant at the .001 level.

Table 2

Correlations among study variables (Study 2)

	Commitment	Dissolution Consideration	Stay/Leave Status	Leave Behaviors
Commitment				
Dissolution Consideration	-.660***			
Stay/Leave Status	-.338***	.315***		
Leave Behaviors	-.357***	.326***	.791***	
Immediacy of Dissolution	-.141	.230*	n/a	n/a

*Note.* Results are controlling for the effects of participants' age, sex, sexual orientation, relationship duration, cohabitation status, and whether the partners were separated by greater than 100 miles. \*\*\*  $p < .0001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$



Table 3

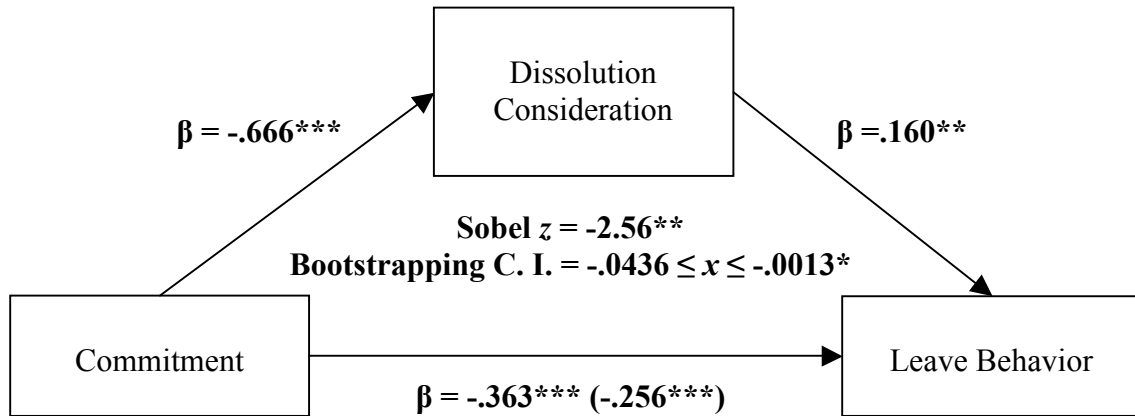
Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Leave Behaviors (Study 2)

	$\beta$	t	p<	R <sup>2</sup>	F	df	p<
Model 1: Step 1				.026	1.77	6, 402	.104
Age	-.012	-.23	.815				
Sex	-.003	-.07	.946				
Sexual Orientation	-.049	-.98	.328				
Relationship Duration	-.051	-.99	.324				
Cohabitation Status	.080	1.56	.120				
Long Distance Status	-.100	-1.99	.047				
Model 1: Step 2				.150	10.12	7,401	<.0001
Age	.003	.06	.954				
Sex	.070	1.44	.152				
Sexual Orientation	-.060	-1.28	.200				
Relationship Duration	-.022	-.44	.657				
Cohabitation Status	.057	1.18	.240				
Long Distance Status	-.100	-2.15	.032				
Commitment	-.363	-7.66	<.0001				
Model 1: Step 3				.164	9.81	8, 400	<.0001
Age	.005	.11	.916				
Sex	.066	1.38	.170				
Sexual Orientation	-.064	-1.39	.166				
Relationship Duration	-.049	-.99	.322				
Cohabitation Status	.056	1.17	.242				
Long Distance Status	-.086	-1.84	.066				
Commitment	-.256	-4.09	<.0001				
Dissolution Consideration	.160	2.58	.010				

Figure Caption

*Figure 1.* Association between commitment level and enactment of leave behaviors as mediated by dissolution consideration.

Figure 1



*Note.* Results are controlling for the effects of participants' age, sex, sexual orientation, relationship duration, cohabitation status, and whether the partners were separated by greater than 100 miles. \*\*\*  $p < .0001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$